

Record Conflicts Drive Peace to Historic Low as AI warfare surges

London, June 9, 2026 – The 2026 Global Peace Index (GPI), released today by the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), reveals a world struggling with the economic consequences of a record-high number of conflicts that are increasingly interconnected and difficult to resolve. This deterioration is driven by a profound geopolitical shift, characterised by the rising influence of middle powers and the waning strength of traditional European powers known as the “Great Fragmentation.” This is also accompanied by a rapid technological revolution in warfare that is leaving international law and diplomacy far behind.

For the first time in history, machines are making life-and-death combat decisions faster than any human can review them, and the international frameworks meant to govern them barely exist.

Key results

- 99 countries witnessed a deterioration in peacefulness in the past year, the highest number since the inception of the Index 20 years ago.
- 119 countries, 73%, are now less peaceful than when the GPI was first published in 2007.
- The number of countries engaged in external conflict has nearly doubled from 59 in 2008 to 103 in the 2026 GPI.
- The global economic impact of violence increased by 3.2% to US\$21.81 trillion in 2025, equivalent to 10.5% of global GDP.
- Drone attacks rose by over 11,500% between 2018 and 2025, while AI has compressed targeting times from one day to seconds.
- Deaths from global conflict remain at historic highs, with over 181,000 killed in 2025, a six-fold increase since 2008.
- Led by Europe, global military expenditure reached a record US\$2.9 trillion in 2025. Excluding the US, military expenditure increased by 9.2%.
- Successful diplomacy that prevents the war in Iran from restarting would be worth approximately US\$2.2 trillion to the global economy.

Global peacefulness deteriorated for the 12th consecutive year, with the number of active, state-based conflicts reaching 61. This is the highest number since the end of the Second World War. Underpinning the long-term decline is a six-fold rise in internal conflict deaths since 2007, from 29,000 to over 181,000 in 2025, while the number of countries recording 1,000 or more conflict deaths is the highest since the inception of the GPI 20 years ago.

This escalation sits inside a broader structural transformation of the international system termed the “Great Fragmentation.” As rising middle powers fill the vacuum left by declining traditional great powers, the global rules for peace are fracturing. This shift is highlighted by the sharp decline in the economic influence of European powers over the last three decades. Since 1995, Germany’s share of global GDP has fallen by 49%, France’s by 44%, and Italy’s by 42%. With multilateral institutions diminished and great power consensus weakened, the historical mechanisms for ending wars are failing. The share of conflicts ending in a peace agreement has plummeted from 23% in the 1970s to just 4% in the last decade, while global investment in proactive peacebuilding stands at just 0.52% of total military spending.

AI and the New Tools of War

Drones have become a defining weapon of modern warfare, with recorded attacks rising by 11,500% between 2018 and 2025. This proliferation extends beyond nation-states, as 565 different armed groups, including criminal cartels, carried out drone attacks during that period.

In Gaza, algorithmic targeting has reportedly compressed the human review of AI-generated targets to roughly 20 seconds per strike. In Ukraine, autonomous systems are being deployed to engage targets without an operator in the loop. This raises serious concerns about the erosion of meaningful human oversight in lethal decision-making.

Global Highlights

Amid these global pressures, Iceland remains the most peaceful country, a position it has held for 19 consecutive years, followed by New Zealand, Switzerland, Slovenia and Ireland. For the first time, Russia is the least peaceful country globally, followed by Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ukraine, and Israel. South Asia recorded the largest regional deterioration in the 2026 Index, driven by falls in peacefulness in Nepal and Pakistan. Meanwhile, political instability and a surge in violent demonstrations drove a 4% decline in the United States, pushing it to 134th, its lowest-ever ranking since the Index was created.

The economic impact of violence worldwide rose by 3.2% to a record US\$21.81 trillion. This is equivalent to 10.5% of global GDP. The disparity in economic impact is stark: for the ten countries most affected by violence, the average impact was 23.4% of GDP, compared to just 2.2% for the ten least affected.

Steve Killelea, Founder & Executive Chairman of IEP, said:

“As the ‘Great Fragmentation’ intensifies, the institutions of peace are being outpaced by rapid changes in geopolitics and technology, and governments are struggling to keep up. Conflict clusters are becoming more internationalised and larger, making them exceptionally difficult to resolve. The most significant of these clusters is the arc of instability now stretching from South Asia through Iran and the Middle East, and into the Horn of Africa.

“AI and autonomous drone technology are making life and death decisions with human oversight reduced to seconds. At the same time, governance systems are lagging behind real-world events as civilian casualties soar. The humanitarian consequences are considerable.”

The Rise and Spread of Conflict

Internationalised intrastate conflicts have increased by 175% since 2010. This new era of warfare is defined by overlapping conflict systems, in which localised wars are no longer isolated but instead feed into broader regional instabilities through political, economic, and military factors, as well as refugee flows.

These dynamics are increasingly fuelled by self-financing, illicit economies. The production value of illicit drug economies in five major conflict-affected states more than quadrupled between 2015 and 2024, rising from US\$14 billion to US\$59 billion.

Sudan's civil war is the world's most severe humanitarian crisis, with an estimated 150,000 people killed, over 12 million displaced, and famine confirmed across multiple regions. The

country serves as a prime example of how conflict clusters operate, as conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, and Somalia are interlocked by refugee flows, proxy sponsorship, and illicit trade. The war in Sudan is partially self-financing through gold. The Rapid Support Forces produced an estimated ten tonnes in 2024 alone, worth approximately US\$860 million. With gold prices rising to historic highs, the financial incentive to control mines has skyrocketed, making it unlikely that withdrawing external state sponsorship will stop the fighting.

Iran War and Economic Impact

The war in Iran acts as a massive geopolitical force multiplier, amplifying existing conflict pathways and spreading instability. Beyond the immediate macroeconomic shock, the conflict has fuelled existing proxy networks and cross-border insurgencies, from Iran-backed militias in Iraq to Balochistan separatist groups launching attacks across the Pakistan-Iran border, threatening to pull neighbouring states into a wider regional conflagration.

Economically, the impact will be substantial and unevenly distributed. While the first-year global GDP loss is estimated at 0.6%, the worst impact falls on a narrow group of fragile, import-dependent economies. There is a looming crisis in global food production, with disrupted supply chains impacting future yields across South Asia and East Africa. Harvest shortfalls and food inflation will hit severely in late 2026 and 2027.

Highly fragile nations like Pakistan, Egypt, and Kenya face a combined US\$5.1 billion in debt rollovers in late 2026 amid disrupted trade routes and strict IMF programme reviews. The difference between a prolonged stalemate and the resumption of war is stark. Successful diplomacy that prevents this would be worth approximately US\$2.2 trillion to the global economy.

Regional Highlights

Europe remains the most peaceful region, home to seven of the ten most peaceful countries. However, its long-term trend of demilitarisation has reversed sharply since 2022. The Middle East and North Africa remain the least peaceful region, home to four of the bottom ten countries.

South Asia had the largest regional deterioration in peacefulness, with Nepal falling 26 places, the steepest drop globally, and Pakistan falling to 152nd.

North and Central America's peacefulness deteriorated, driven by the fall in the US.

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Notes to Editors

The full GPI 2026 report and interactive map are available at: visionofhumanity.org and economicsandpeace.org

X: [@GlobPeaceIndex](https://twitter.com/GlobPeaceIndex)

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About the Global Peace Index (GPI)

The GPI is produced by the international think tank the Institute for Economics & Peace and has been published annually for the past 20 years. It is the most comprehensive resource on global peace trends, ranking 163 independent states and territories, covering 99.7% of the world's population. It uses multiple indicators to measure the state of peace across 'societal safety and security', 'ongoing domestic and international conflict', and 'degree of militarisation'.

About the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP)

The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) is the world's leading think tank dedicated to developing metrics to analyse peace and to quantify its economic value. It does this by developing global and national indices, including the annual Global Peace Index, calculating the economic cost of violence, and understanding Positive Peace — the attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies.